

Just So You Know and Politeness/Impoliteness Strategies (Part I: Papers on the Three-Tier Model of Language Use)

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*Just So You Know and Politeness/Impoliteness Strategies**

Takahito Nobe

1. Introduction

Since Grice (1975), the notion of the Cooperative Principle has had an enormous influence in the field of pragmatics, as an account of our ordinary linguistic behavior. However, it has been pointed out that Grice's theory is not itself fully sufficient because people often do not observe the conversational maxims in actual conversation, which are guidelines for action required by the Cooperative Principle (Leech (1983), Thomas (1995)).

In order to account for such exceptions to Grice's theory (and thereby rescuing it), some politeness principles have been proposed as social constraints on the cooperative principle (Brown and Levinson (1987), Fraser (1990), Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983)). Politeness principles account for, if not completely, why people sometimes fail to observe Grice's maxims: These maxims are violated for politeness purposes, i.e. maintaining or improving interpersonal relationships. Accordingly, as theories of politeness developed, much effort has been spent on the analysis of linguistic devices that are used as politeness strategies to maintain or improve interpersonal relationship (Brown and Levinson (1987), Fraser (1975, 1980), Lakoff (1973)).

However, there are not only expressions that are used for politeness strategies: Some expressions can serve not only as a politeness strategy but also as an *impoliteness* strategy for one to be aggressive, belligerent, insulting, etc. Let us take up the expression *just so you know* exemplified below to illustrate the point. Some online dictionaries describe that *just so you know* is used to preface a statement like 'just to say a few words.'

- (1) a. **Karen:** Hey, do you see that guy behind you in the blue blazer against the wall?
Jim: Yep.
Karen: That's Drake. And just so you know, I don't want to be weird or anything, but we used to date.
Jim: Oh, ok. Cool. Thanks for telling me.
Karen: And it didn't end well.

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- Jim:** Gotcha. Alright. (*The Office* S03E17¹)
- b. **Monica:** We're going to Las Vegas to see your dad. It's time you two talked and I want to get to know my father-in-law.
- Chandler:** Y'know we already went over this and I won!
- Monica:** No you didn't. Oh and honey just so you know, now that you're marrying me, you don't get to win anymore. (*Friends* S07E22)

A closer inspection reveals, however, that *just so you know* can be used both as poteness and impoliteness strategies. As *Eijirou on the Web* states, *just so you know* can be paraphrased as 'not that it's important' and trivialize the utterance.² Thus, in (1a) *just so you know* is used for the speaker to be polite by mitigating the force of the utterance that contains shocking information for the hearer. In contrast, the same expression in (1b) makes the overall statement sound *impolite* by somehow intensifying the utterance by which the speaker contradicts the hearer.

A crucial point to note here is that one and the same linguistic form is intentionally used *as a strategy* to produce impoliteness effect as in (1b), as well as politeness effect as in (1a).³ Why this should be the case needs to be accounted for. In answering this question, however, there is a problem: Although there are linguistic devices that are employed as impoliteness strategies, previous studies have overemphasized politeness (Culpepper (1996, 2011)) and mostly dealt with politeness expressions and strategies; studies on impoliteness are a recent movement.

Accordingly, there have not been many studies concerning expressions that are employed *specifically* for impoliteness strategies. Even though there are (e.g. Holmes (1984), Culpeper (2010)), they go no further than listing such expressions.⁴ As long as the same linguistic form can equally be employed for politeness and impoliteness strategies, we should place an equal amount of weight on politeness and impoliteness in the analysis.

¹ S and E stand for Season and Episode respectively.

² *Eijirou on the Web* is available online at <http://www.alc.co.jp/>

³ It has generally been observed that particular linguistic forms can be impolite if used in violation of certain politeness principles (Brown and Levinson (1987)). The emphasis here is that there exist special linguistic forms that the speaker can consciously exploit as impoliteness strategies.

⁴ Culpeper (2010) discusses "conventionalized impoliteness formulae" such as insults, pointed criticisms, condescension, etc. and lists linguistic forms for each category. He does not, however, focus on particular expressions in detail as is done in this paper.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is as follows: By taking up the expression *just so you know*, which functions both politely and impolitely, I will show that not only politeness but also impoliteness strategies play a significant role in communication. That is, I will argue for the necessity for placing equal weight on politeness and impoliteness in the pragmatic analysis. In order to make the point for the claim, the three-tier model of language use proposed by Hirose (this volume) comes in useful.

The organization of this paper is as follows: Section 2 provides basic properties of *just so you know* and identify its basic meaning and proposes the reason why *just so you know* can be used for politeness and impoliteness strategies in relation to its basic meaning and Lakoff's (1973) politeness principles "Don't impose." Section 3 argues for the necessity of placing equal weight on politeness and impoliteness in the pragmatic analysis by demonstrates that impoliteness, as well as politeness, plays a part in interpersonal communication. Section 4 gives concluding remarks.

2. The Form and Meaning of *Just So You Know* and Their Relation to Politeness/Impoliteness

In this section, firstly we will see if *just so you know* actually serves as impoliteness, as well as politeness strategies. If so, we will secondly elucidate on what principle the determination of politeness/impoliteness of *just so you know* is dependent on.

2.1. *Just So You Know as a Variation of the So That Clause*

In this subsection, I will present basic characteristics of *just so you know* and identify its basic meaning, which is crucial in accounting for how the expression can be exploited for both politeness and impoliteness strategies.

Let us first focus on the part *so you know* of *just so you know*. Considering the fact that the complementizer *that* can occur in the expression as in (2) below, *just so you know* can be thought of as a variation of the type of clause introduced by *so (that)* (henceforth the *so that* clause):

- (2) Just so that you know, I did not steal the car. (COCA)

Example (2) shows a common form of the *so that* clause with *so (that)* introducing a subordinate clause.

Next we turn our eye on the meaning of *just so you know*. The *so that* clause has two different meanings, namely *purpose* and *result*:

- (3) a. We paid him immediately so that he would leave contented.
 b. We paid him immediately, so (that) he left contented.
 (Quirk et al. (1985:1108))

The *so that* clause in (3a) is interpreted as the purpose of event described by the matrix clause. (3b), on the other hand, is an instance of result and the *so that* clause expresses the result of the event expressed by the matrix clause.

In the case of *just so you know*, there are some pieces of evidence that it involves purpose, rather than result.⁵ Firstly, purpose cases can be pre-posed as in (4a), whereas result cases cannot as in (4b).

- (4) a. So that he would leave contented, we paid him immediately.
 b. *So that he left contented, we paid him immediately.

Just so you know is often placed at the beginning of the sentence, as seen in (1a) and (1b). That is, it shows the same behavior as the purpose case in (4a) in this respect.

Secondly, result cases cannot be modified by *just* as in (5a) while purpose ones can be as in (5b):

- (5) a. We paid him immediately, just so that he would leave contented.
 b. *We paid him immediately, just so that he left contented.

As is obvious from the form *just so you know*, *just* is one of the salient element in the expression.⁶ This means that *just so you know* again shows the same behavior as the purpose case in (5a).

From the above observations, I conclude that *just so you know* is a variation of the *so that* clause with the purpose meaning. Now, let us see in more detail how *just so you know* and the *so that* clause are related.⁷

The *so that* clause permits two different interpretations with regard to the target of its modification: the propositional modification and the speech act modification as illustrated in (6) and (7), respectively.⁸

⁵ Besides, my informants report the purpose meaning in *just so you know* rather than that of result.

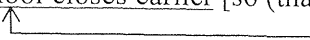
⁶ The form *so you know* has not been found so far.

⁷ Hereafter, I use the term the “*so that* clause” to refer only to the *so that* clause with the purpose meaning, since the result meaning is not relevant in the discussion from here.

⁸ It is widely known that other types of clauses and prepositional phrases permit different interpretations as to modification (cf. Lakoff (1971), Levinson (1983), Sweetser

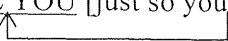
- (6) a. The school closes earlier so (that) the children can get home before dark. (Quirk et al. (1985:1108))

b. [The school closes earlier [so (that) the children can get home before dark]].

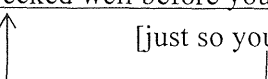


- (7) a. Meredith, I'm not gonna pressure you. Take all the time you need. But just so you have all the information, my home was wrecked well before you came into the picture and I'm just now done trying to rebuild it. (Grey's Anatomy S03E02)

b. [I TELL YOU [just so you have all the information] [my home was wrecked well before you came into the picture...]]



c.??[My home was wrecked well before you came into the picture... [just so you have all the information]]



(6a) is an instance of the *so that* clause that modifies the propositional element (here, the matrix clause), as illustrated in (6b). On the other hand (7a) is a case where the *so that* clause modifies the speech act rather than the propositional content, as shown in (7b); the interpretation where the *so that* clause modifies the proposition does not make sense as in (7c).

With regard to modification, *just so you know* shows the same behavior as cases involving the speech act:⁹ In (8a), below if *just so you know* is interpreted as modifying the propositional content, it results in an anomalous interpretation as in (8b). Consider the interpretation of *just so you know* in

(1990)), etc.).

⁹ Incidentally, the form *just so you know COMPLEMENT* can permit both interpretations:

- (i) I'm gonna pinch you just so you know you're here. (COCA)
 (ii) So just so you know where we are, Seattle is about 2400 miles from New York City as the crow flies... (COCA)

(i) is a case of propositional modification and (ii) speech act modification. I will not consider these cases in this paper.

context. This ambiguity *just so you know* has makes it possible for the expression to be exploited for both politeness and impoliteness strategies. To this point we will now turn.

2.2. *The Mechanism for the Politeness/Impoliteness Uses of Just So You Know*

What is crucial in clarifying the function of *just so you know* as politeness/impoliteness strategies is the politeness principle “Don’t impose,” proposed by Lakoff (1973). This principle requires the speaker not to “intrude into ‘other people’s business’” (Lakoff (1973:298)). *Just so you know* can indicate either that the speaker is observing this principle or that he is blatantly violating it. Therefore, this linguistic form can be exploited both as politeness and impoliteness strategies. In what follows, I will discuss how the use of *just so you know* leads to the observance or violation of the principle “Don’t impose.”

2.2.1. *Just So You Know as a Politeness Strategy*

One of the most salient meaning of *just* is “no more than” (Leech and Svartvik (2003), i.e. something is not many or not to a great degree. This gives rise to the function to mitigate some process (Quirk et al. (1985)).¹² That is, “the speaker uses the particle [*just*] to minimise the significance of some process” (Lee (1987:378)).

If this function is combined with the purpose clause *so you know*, *just* mitigates the importance of the purpose of the utterance in question. That is, *just* mitigates the hearer’s obligation to accept the information in question:

- (12) *just* (mitigator) + *so you know* → mitigation of the hearer’s obligation to accept the information in question

In other words, when *just* functions as mitigator, *just so you know* expresses that the speaker is attempting to avoid imposing the information under consideration on the hearer. That is to say, *Just so you know* indicates that the speaker is observing the politeness principle “Don’t impose.”¹³ Therefore, the use of *just*

¹² This function is referred to in many different terms: “down-toner,” “diminisher” (Quirk et al. (1985)), “depreciatory meaning,” (Lee (1987)), “down-toning” (Aijmer (2002)), etc.

¹³ Moreover, the above mentioned “no more than” meaning indicates that the purpose of the speech act is no more than the hearer knowing the information. That is, *just so you know* implies that there is only the act of information giving involved and no other more face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson (1987)), i.e. the preclusion of more face-threatening

so you know signals the speaker's attitude to be polite.

2.2.2. Just So You Know as an Impoliteness Strategy

Another meaning of *just* is “exactly” or “precisely” (Quirk et al. (1985)). *Just* is a “restrictive subjunct” that “restricts the application of the utterance *exclusively* to the part focused” (Quirk et al. (1985:604). Thus *just* emphasizes some process by placing focus on it (Quirk et al. (1985), Lee (1987), Swan (2005), LDCE⁴). When this *just* as an emphaser applies to the purpose clause *so you know*, it emphasizes the hearer's obligation to accept the information conveyed by the main clause.

- (13) *just* (emphasizer) + *so you know* —→ emphasis on the hearer's obligation to accept the information in question

To put it differently, when *just* functions as emphaser, *just so you know* expresses the speaker's attitude of imposing the information under consideration on the hearer. This is blatantly in contradiction with the politeness principle “Don't impose.” In other words, *just so you know* can be used to actively violate this politeness principles. Therefore, *just so you know* indicates the speaker's attitude to be impolite

2.3. Summary

As shown in the previous subsections, *just so you know* can in principle serve as politeness and impoliteness strategies, respectively. Therefore, the intuitive judgment on the polite/impolite uses of *just so you know* in (1) proves to be right. More specifically, what determines the politeness or impoliteness of *just so you know* is the politeness principle “Don't impose.” As a politeness strategy, *just so you know* mitigates the hearer's obligation to accept the information in question thereby indicating the speaker's observance of the principle. As an impoliteness strategy, on the other hand, *just so you know* emphasizes the hearer's obligation to accept the information in question thereby expressing the speaker's active violation of the principle.

3. Just So You Know and the Adjustment of Prospective Interpersonal Relationship

In the last section, we have clarified the reason why *just so you know* can

acts. This, too, makes *just so you know* serve as a (negative) politeness strategy.

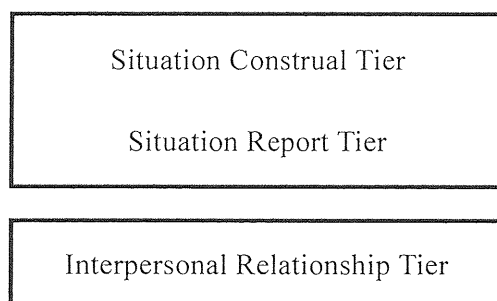
serve both as politeness and impoliteness strategies, depending on whether the speaker observes or violates the politeness principle “Don’t impose.” In order to show that impoliteness strategies as well as politeness ones are crucial to language use, this section demonstrates that not only politeness but also impoliteness which are expressed by *just so you know* plays an important role in modifying interpersonal relationship in communication. In doing so, Hirose’s (this volume) three-tier model of language use comes in useful. Therefore, let us begin this section by briefly surveying the model.

3.1. *The Three-Tier Model of Language Use*

Hirose (this volume) proposes a language model called the three-tier model of language use, which has been developed from his previous works based on the concepts of public and private self (Hirose (1995, 2000, 2002), Hasegawa and Hirose (2005), Hirose and Hasegawa (2010)). This model is designed to give a principled account of certain differences between English and Japanese in relation to a number of grammatico-pragmatic phenomena. We will mainly look at some characteristics of the language relevant to the present discussion, English.

Hirose (this volume) claims that the speaker is decomposed into two distinct aspects: the “public self,” on the one hand, responsible for communication, and the “private self,” on the other, responsible for thought and consciousness; and language use can be analyzed as a complex of three different tiers, i.e. “situation construal” tier, “situation report” tier and “interpersonal relationship” tier. In the first tier, the speaker as private self construes a given situation from which to form a thought accordingly. In the second tier, the speaker as public self communicates to the addressee what he has construed. In the third tier, the speaker as public self pays attention to his interpersonal relationship with the addressee.

In this model, it is assumed that languages show different behavior with respect to how the three tiers are combined, which depends on whether the basic “egocentricity” of a given language lies in the public self or the private self. English is a public-self centered language where the three tiers are combined in such a way that the situation construal tier and the situation report tier are unified, on the one hand, and the interpersonal relationship tier is dissociated from the other two tiers, on the other, forming an independent tier, as illustrated in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1**

(adapted from Hirose (this volume:6) with modifications)

In such public-self centered languages, since the situation construal tier and situation report are unified, unmarked expressions in English can serve as public expressions (expressions for communication) without special devices to ensure communicativity.¹⁴ Observe the following example:

- (14) a. Today is Saturday.
 b. I SAY TO YOU Today is Saturday.

(Hirose (this volume:12))

Here, we can see that the unmarked form (14a) is by default interpreted as something like (14b) where communicativity is guaranteed by I SAY TO YOU. On the other hand, since the interpersonal relationship tier is detached from the situation report tier, the speaker of English by default does not need to use linguistic devices concerning interpersonal relationship. If the speaker wants to express interpersonal relationship with the hearer, he needs to employ special expressions like address terms:

¹⁴ In private-self centered language, where the situation construal is dissociated from the other two tiers, the speaker needs to mark the utterance (i) with, for example, a particle like *yo* as in (ii) to ensure the communicativity (cf. Shizawa (2011) and Hirose (this volume) for fuller discussion) (COP = copula, SFP = sentence-final particle, TOP = topic):

- (i) a. *Kyoo wa doyoubi da.*
 Today TOP Saturday COP
 ‘Today is Saturday.’
 b. # I SAY TO YOU *Kyoo wa doyoubi da.*

(Hirose (this volume:11))

- (ii) a. *Kyoo wa doyoubi da yo*
 Today TOP Saturday COP SFP

(Hirose (this volume:13))

- (15) Today is Saturday,
 {madam/ma'am/Mrs.Brown/Jane/darling/honey/etc.}.
 (Hirose (this volume:13))

That is to say, in English only when there are special reasons to adjust interpersonal relations are linguistic forms related to interpersonal relationship added. Such linguistic forms do not contribute to the propositional content conveyed.

Bearing the above observations, we will discuss the role *just so you know* plays in modifying interpersonal relationship.

3.2. Just So You Know *as a Linguistic Device Related to Interpersonal Relationship*

Just so you know is a superfluous expression insofar as the propositional content is concerned. That is, it is optional to the communication of the propositional content:

- (16) a. Just so you know, I'm not going to the party with you.
b. I'm not going to the party with you.

Even though we remove *just so you know* in (16a), the propositional content *I'm not going to the party with you* is unaffected as in (16b). In this respect, *just so you know* behaves in the same way as address terms and thus it can be thought of as an expression added for the adjustment of interpersonal relationship. Then, for what exactly *just so you know* is added to the proposition? In order to answer this question, we hypothesize in the following lines: *Just so you know* is a linguistic form that is added so as to adjust prospective interpersonal relationship potentially brought about by the communication of the proposition in question. More specifically:

- (17) a. *Just so you know* compensates for the impoliteness caused by the propositional content, by showing that the speaker is strictly observing the politeness principle “Don’t impose.”
- b. *Just so you know* reinforces the impoliteness caused by the propositional content, by showing that the speaker is actively violating the politeness principle “Don’t impose.”

In this way, the adjustment of prospective interpersonal relationship works in

both polite and impolite directions. In the following subsections, we will verify the validity of the hypothesis above based on actual instances.

3.3. Just So You Know as a Politeness Strategy

This subsection investigates examples where *just so you know* is employed as a politeness strategy. In this case, as stated in (19a), *just so you know*, which can indicate the observance of the politeness principle “Don’t impose,” serves to compensate for the impoliteness caused by the propositional content at issue. Let us first consider the example given in section 1:

- (18) **Karen:** Hey, do you see that guy behind you in the blue blazer against the wall?
Jim: Yep.
Karen: That’s Drake. And just so you know, I don’t want to be weird or anything, but we used to date.
Jim: Oh, ok. Cool. Thanks for telling me.
Karen: And it didn’t end well.
Jim: Gotcha. Alright. (= (1a))

In this example, the speaker (Karen) has recently transferred from another branch of the same corporation, which has been shut down, to the branch where the hearer (Jim (=Karen’s current boyfriend)) works. They go to a social party at their CEO’s house where other workers from different branches come. Among the other guests, Karen spots a guy (who presumably used to work at Karen’s former office) and confesses to Jim that they used to date. This propositional content is clearly a piece of information that is shocking to the hearer and embarrassing to the speaker (hence face-threatening). The speaker, in a romantic relationship with the hearer, does not want to deteriorate the relationship, so she needs to be polite. The speaker, then, employs the linguistic device *just so you know* to compensate for the face-threatening propositional content by indicating that the speaker is observing the politeness principle “Don’t impose” and thus the utterance is not intended to threaten their relationship. In this way, *just so you know* contributes to producing politeness effect by modifying interpersonal relationship.

Let us move on to the next example where indirect speech acts are involved:

- (19) **Marlin:** Just so you know, he's got a little fin. I find if he's having trouble swimming, let him take a break. Ten, fifteen minutes.
- Nemo:** Dad, it's time for you to go now. (*Finding Nemo*)

This is a scene where Nemo, a little clown fish, goes to school for the first time away from his over-protective father, Marlin. Nemo's fin is congenitally abnormally small. Marlin (the speaker) gives the hearer, Mr. Ray (the teacher) the information about the fin and what he usually does for Nemo due to the handicap (*I find if he's having trouble swimming, let him take a break. Ten, fifteen minutes.*). The utterance in question can be interpreted as an indirect order or request for Mr. Ray to do the same. Such speech acts are generally regarded as face-threatening (Brown and Levinson (1987:65-66)). Moreover, it is generally thought that teachers are socially superior to parents and so it may not be a polite thing to tell the teacher what to do. Thus, the speaker has the motivation to be polite. The speaker, then, employs the linguistic device *just so you know* and re-emphasize his observance of "Don't impose" so as to compensate for the face threat caused by the proposition.

3.4. Just So You Know as an Impoliteness Strategy

Let us now move on to cases which involve *just so you know* as an impoliteness strategy. In these cases, *just so you know*, which can indicate the speaker's attitude to intentionally violate the politeness principle "Don't impose," reinforces, rather than to compensate for, the impoliteness in order to threaten the hearer or the speaker's interpersonal relationship with her.

- (20) **Monica:** We're going to Las Vegas to see your dad. It's time you two talked and I want to get to know my father-in-law.
- Chandler:** Y'know we already went over this and I won!
- Monica:** No you didn't. Oh and honey just so you know, now that you're marrying me, you don't get to win anymore.
- (= (1b))

Monica (the speaker) characteristically hates to lose in anything and Chandler (the hearer) is her husband-to-be. They have been arguing about whether Chandler should see his father, whom he has not seen for a long time. Chandler maintains that they have already talked about the matter and he won

(i.e. they concluded that Chandler does not need to see his father). As a counter-argument, Monica claims that he did not win and, moreover, he is not to win anymore (for the marriage to work). Note the utterance is face-threatening in that it disregards the hearer's case in an overt manner. Monica is being confrontational in trying to make Chandler accept these two points, especially the second point (not only did he not win this time but he will never). Moreover, it is clear from the utterance that speaker is showing that she is in a superior position in their relationship. That is to say, she has the reason and intention to be imposing and impolite. In order to achieve this goal, Monica thus uses *just so you know* to show that she is intentionally violating "Don't impose." Thus, *just so you know* contributes to reinforcing the impoliteness (face threat) related to the propositional content.

In the next example the speaker is more blatantly being belligerent:

- (21) **Rachel:** And hey! Just so you know, it's not that common! It doesn't happen to every guy! And it is a big deal!!
(*Friends* S04E01)

These sentences are uttered in context in which Ross and Rachel have been having aggressive verbal exchanges. Notice that this is a kind of situation in which the participants are expected to be impolite because they are insulting and try to hurt each other. Ross gives a witty repartee in the previous discourse (*don't you worry about me falling asleep. I still have your letter*), so Rachel has a motivation to be particularly impolite to get back at Ross. She thus employ *just so you know* to show that she is actively disobeying "Don't impose." This violation of politeness principle related to the language system intensifies the impoliteness resulting from the proposition. As a result, the overall utterance is a profound insult or humiliation.

3.5. Summary

As has been demonstrated, *just so you know*, which is a superfluous element in the communication of the proposition, plays the role in adjusting prospective interpersonal relationship affected by the impolite propositional content. Such adjustment is performed by not only compensating for the impolite proposition (polite) but also reinforcing it (impoliteness). In other words, it does not always used as a politeness strategy but as a impoliteness strategy to actively deteriorate interpersonal relation. Therefore, the adjustment of prospective interpersonal relationship in the impolite direction is

equally important and thus we also need to pay attention to impoliteness strategies in interpersonal communication.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we saw how one and the same expression can be used for impoliteness, as well as politeness, strategies. In doing so, we argued for the necessity to pay attention to impoliteness in interpersonal communication, as well as politeness. In Section 2, we took up the expression *just so you know*, examined its compositional meaning from *just*, *so (that)* and *you know*, and investigated the relation between the linguistic form and politeness and impoliteness on the basis of the Lakoff's politeness principle (1973) "Don't impose." More specifically, due to the mitigating and emphatic meaning of *just*, *just so you know* serves to mitigate or emphasize the hearer's obligation to accept the information in question. These two meanings can be exploited as a politeness strategy (observance of "Don't impose"), on the one hand, and impoliteness strategy (intentional violation of "Don't impose"), on the other. In section 3, we argued for the necessity of impoliteness, as well as politeness, in the pragmatic analysis by showing how exactly *just so you know* contributes to politeness and impoliteness in actual interaction. We hypothesized that *just so you know* is used to show that the speaker is observing or violating the politeness principle "Don't impose" in order to compensate for or reinforce the impoliteness caused by the propositional content. I hope that this work contributes to a deeper understanding the nature of politeness and, especially, impoliteness.

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